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**LIGHTNING
STRIKES
THE SILENCE**

A LANE WINSLOW MYSTERY

PROLOGUE

“LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE, YOU pig! Why don’t you go back where you came from!”

He barely had time to form an answer when he was pushed so violently that he stumbled backward, falling in a heap, hurting his hip on the rough ground. In a fury, he scrambled up and lunged at his attacker’s feet, knocking him over so that his head fell hard on the rocks.

“Say that again!” But the boy didn’t move.

“Say it again!” he yelled, swiping at the boy to make him move, and then struck him hard. “Say it!” he was screaming now. “Go on!” He kicked the downed figure, feeling the blood pounding in his own head. “Don’t you play dead with me! For the rest of your life, you look behind you, ’cause I’ll be there! Do you hear me?”

He was deafened now by his own rage. He heard nothing—neither the woman screaming nor the man yelling—until he felt himself being lifted off the ground, someone shouting from a distance, “Stop! For God’s sake, stop!”

CHAPTER ONE

June 11, 1948

THE EXPLOSION WAS DEEP AND resonant, and so unfamiliar that the residents of King's Cove who were outside, which was most of them on a beautiful June day, looked upward thinking it was odd to have thunder out of so clear a blue sky.

Lane Winslow, reading under the weeping willow, frowned, closed her book, and struggled up from her folding canvas chair. Where had the boom come from? Having dismissed the idea that it was thunder, she turned her mind to her neighbours. Had an explosion accidentally ignited in someone's coal cellar? It seemed to be coming from up the mountain a little south of her. The Hughes family lived up there!

She dropped her book and ran into the house to seize the car keys off the hook by the inside of the door, jumped into her little Austin, backed it hurriedly onto the road, and then swung it around and made for the fork that led on

up the hill toward the Hughes house. She turned left and bumped as quickly as she could down the rutted road that ran alongside their fenced field, her tires sinking into the muddy pools still left from the torrential rain of the night before. She saw their two milking cows cowering under a tree, and she tried to go faster, conscious of the deep ruts causing the centre hump to scrape the bottom of her car. In the driveway, she stopped and gazed around her.

Not a bloom out of place. The magnificent flower borders maintained by the grande dame of the family, old Gladys Hughes, flowed around the fruit trees, and the curved patches of lawn were the luminous green of early summer. Drops of moisture on the plants dazzled in the mid-morning sun. No smoke, no fire. Just a gentle mist as the sun evaporated the remains of the night's rain. But the two cocker spaniels were definitely kicking up a fuss. She saw what she had missed initially. At the edge of the apple orchard, all three Hughes women were standing with their hands shielding their eyes, looking west up the mountain. Then Mabel, the elder of the two "girls," both in their fifties, leaned over and tried to hush the hysterically barking dogs.

Lane got out of the car and hurried along the final bit of grassy drive to where they were standing.

"You heard it too," Gwen, the younger daughter, said, turning to greet Lane. "The dogs have gone mad."

"I thought it came from here," Lane said. She too gazed in the direction of the hill above the orchard where they had been looking.

"Good of you to come," Gladys said, glancing at her. "All tip-top here. It came from up there somewhere." She

pointed to where the thickly treed mountainside climbed steeply above King's Cove. "I thought it might be those Sons of whatever they are, those Freedomites blowing things up again, but there's nothing up there to blow up. It's just bush. Do you think some hound is blasting up there looking for silver? That would be the bloody limit!"

"Language, Mother," Mabel said, then pointed up the hill, "Is that smoke?"

The dogs took up their chorus again. "It is, I think," Lane confirmed. "I wonder if anyone is up there and been hurt."

"If whatever it is sets the forest alight, we're all for it," Gladys said grimly. King's Cove had lived through the fire of 1919, which had destroyed several houses and most of the orchards in the north part of the settlement. "We'd best telephone the authorities." She started back to the house.

"How far up do you think that is?" asked Lane.

Gwen considered. "It's hard to tell from here. We sometimes hike up that way with the dogs; it's a good forty minutes to where we go, but that smoke is much farther still. There's a rocky outcrop with a marvellous view of this arm of the lake and the mountains. There's not really a proper trail there, though."

"Higher up than forty minutes?" Lane was becoming more uneasy. The smoke was rising blackly above the thick blanket of trees and was rolling over on itself. "I think I'd better go up and make sure there's nobody there."

"Mother can do the phoning. We'll come with you. Let me run and get my first aid kit," Mabel said. "I know the way. I still keep the kit in good nick since the war, though it won't do much if someone is badly burned."

Lane waited impatiently, keeping an eye on whether the smoke patch was getting larger. Finally, Gwen and Mabel came, Gwen carrying a thermos and Mabel a shoulder bag.

“The damn water is patchy again,” said Mabel. “All I got was a blast of air when I turned on the tap. That’s why it took so long. It’s been a bit dodgy for ages, but it’s just got really bad. I’ve got to get Harris to go check the lines. There must be a hole or air pockets in the pipe somewhere. Right, off we go.”

With that Mabel strode off, leading the way, the dogs bounding around her, excited about the adventure.

THE JEWELLERY HEIST must have been so noisy that Darling could scarcely believe the thief was even sane. He stood in front of Harold’s Fine Jewellery and Watch Repairs looking through the window into the chaos inside. No one had spotted anything amiss that morning when they were rushing off to work or shop. It was the ill fate of Mrs. Harold, the jeweller’s wife, to find the devastation when she’d come in to work at ten thirty in the morning. The streets were full of people to-ing and fro-ing, and the café was right across the street, all the window seats occupied by people having their morning break. Seeing the police and a clearly distraught Mrs. Harold had caused all those in window seats to gape out at the scene. It *would* happen on a Friday, Darling thought. It would keep them all busy all weekend.

The store normally opened at eleven. Mrs. Harold always came in early, she explained. “Why did the thief have to break the place up like this?” she asked Darling. “It’s wicked! Ron is away in Vancouver. He’s going to be beside himself

when I tell him. How am I going to cope on my own?" She made as if to go back in. She had evidently taken one look at the mess and run off to get the police.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Harold, you can't go in now. We're about to go in and see what we can find."

"Ron's going to be sick. It's everything we own!" Her voice was beginning to rise.

"I understand. I've got a constable coming along to talk with you. He can take you back to the station and get you a cup of tea. Please tell him anything you can about your inventory. Where do you keep the records? I'll get them out so you can give an accurate account, but let him know if there is anything unusual or of extraordinary value."

Mrs. Harold came marginally out of her state of panic under the influence of Darling's calm manner. "In the back, in the office. My inventory records are in the desk, in the drawer on the right." She fumbled in the pocket of her cardigan. "Here's the key. This one is for the back door, and this is for this door."

"Right, thank you. We'll lock the front for now," Darling said. "My constable will be along in a moment."

My inventory records, she'd said. Like so many businessmen's wives, she must be the chief accountant and record keeper. Mrs. Harold nodded unhappily and looked in the window at the chaos.

Ames and Darling stepped out of earshot. "I'll talk to nearby merchants to see if anyone was working last night and might have heard anything," Ames said, readying his notebook. He shook his head in wonderment. "I was just in there yesterday."

Darling glanced at Ames, allowing only the slightest twitch of an eyebrow, then went to peer in the window while Ames went to the first store south of the jeweller, a tobacco shop. The interior of the Harolds' store was full of glass from broken display cases. Someone really had taken something heavy to the cases, Darling thought. It looked to him like it had been done with a sledgehammer. He frowned and examined the front door. It had been locked when Mrs. Harold had come in that morning.

So, the thief had broken into the back of the shop, performed a sort of smash and grab and escaped the same way, into the alley.

Ames came out after talking with the tobacconist. "Sorry, sir. He knocked off early because it was his wife's birthday yesterday."

"No joy, then. The front door was still locked, so let's assume the back alley. All the display cases are smashed to smithereens. It looks like whoever it was just scooped up what he could."

"It must have been an unbelievable racket."

Darling looked back at the shop. "Yes, indeed. Well, keep at it. I'm going in the back to get the inventory records while Mrs. Harold talks to Terrell."

Someone had come out of the café and had a hand on Mrs. Harold's arm, consoling her where she stood, her arms tightly crossed as she looked miserably at the two policemen.

"Right, sir. I'll try the bakery next door. They come in pretty early, and for all I know stay late."

"Good. If Terrell gets here before I come back, get him to take Mrs. Harold to the station and scare up a cup of

tea for her. Her husband is away, so she's having to cope on her own."

He started to walk toward the end of the street and then turned and stopped, looking closely at Ames. "You were in there yesterday? A present for your mother?"

Ames's cheeks became pink, and Darling waved him on. "Get on with it, then."

Making his way up the hill the half block to the alley, Darling had no difficulty recognizing which rear door belonged to the jewellery store. It was open, and a small canvas bag was lying on the ground, no doubt dropped by the thief in his flight. He picked up the bag and was about to open the drawstring when he saw that there was a smear of what looked like blood, darkening now in the warmth of the morning. The perpetrator must have cut his hand on all the glass. Not surprising considering the mess in the shop. He gingerly pulled the string and looked inside. Several gold chain bracelets. When he went through a dark short passage into the dimly lit office, he was surprised to see that it too had been ransacked. Any normal thief, he had reasoned, would have got into the display cases, seized whatever he could, and then fled. But now this. Why the take time to pull the office to bits?

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he scanned the office, noting the open metal filing cabinet with papers spilling out, and books swept off a low shelf. As he turned to the desk, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Certainly not in Vancouver, but slumped face down at his own desk with something very wrong with the back of his head, was Mr. Ron Harold himself.

Rushing forward, he placed his fingers on the victim's neck, and then nearly snatched them away because it was so cold. No heartbeat. The acrid ferrous smell of blood assailed Darling's nostrils. Nearly gagging and wondering why this man's wife thought he was away, Darling pulled the chain on the desk lamp, but no light resulted. The wall switch was equally unforthcoming. He should have asked Mrs. Harold if there was an alarm. Perhaps the thief had cut the wires to prevent it going off. Ledgers forgotten, Darling pushed the back door wide, letting more light into the murky space, and looked for signs that the owner struggled or fought, though these would have been difficult to distinguish in the disarray of the open drawers and spilled books and boxes. Still, no chair or shelf was overturned as might indicate a physical struggle—and, after all, there was Ronald Harold himself, looking like he'd just put his head down on his desk for a nap. In the better light, Darling saw what was wrong with his head: the back of his skull had been smashed in.

He looked as closely as he dared, decided that more intense scrutiny was a job for Gilly, and took the set of keys out of his pocket. The floor was aged and much-scuffed wood—pine, he guessed—and he could not discern anything in the way of a useful footprint, had one even survived his own tramping in and out. Outside, he stopped to look at the ground, hoping that the rain of the night before would have made a muddy base for a tell-tale size ten boot, but again there was nothing to be seen. If the killer had left while the storm was still on, the rain would have washed away any traces.

He located the key that fit the back door. It was then that he saw that the wire that fed electricity into the shop from the main line was severed and hanging against the back wall. He locked the door and went around the building to Baker Street. They would have to secure the scene and call electricians to fix the hazard.

He was not surprised to see that a crowd had gathered in front of the store, and people were talking animatedly about the break-in. Well, they'd be shocked by what really went on, he thought.

Darling was about to push his way through but stopped. "If anyone heard or saw anything early this morning, or sometime in the night, can we get you to come to the station?" he asked. A general shaking of heads indicated there'd be little business resulting, and Darling sighed. He caught sight of Terrell walking Mrs. Harold back toward the station and pulled Ames away from the crowd. Ames had come back from the baker with an empty notebook.

"I've asked people to come to the station if they know anything. You get down to the station, quick as, and ask Terrell to come back here and secure the scene, then get Gilly here as fast as you can," Darling said.

"Yes, sir." Ames gave a quick surprised look at the store and then back. *Secure the scene* would be appropriate for a robbery, certainly, but Gilly? "What's happened?"

"We have a problem. Owner, Mr. Harold, has been killed. Ask O'Brien to attend to Mrs. Harold in one of the interview rooms; keep her quiet and in the dark for now. Then phone the city to send someone out to deal with a live wire at the back of the shop."

“Sir.”

“Make it snappy.”

Infected now with Darling’s sense of urgency, Ames hurried across the street and down toward the station.

“Sergeant O’Brien, could you relieve Terrell and make sure Mrs. Harold has everything she needs,” he said as he burst through the station door.

Something in Ames’s demeanour caused the usually ponderous O’Brien to almost leap from his stool. “What’s happened?”

“There’s a body,” Ames said in a low voice.

Raising his eyebrows with a shake of his head, and sighing at the sinfulness of man, O’Brien disappeared into the interview room. In the next moment, Terrell came out. “Sir?”

“The boss needs you up there to secure the scene right away. Dead guy. And keep people out of the alley. There’s a live wire hanging off the back of the building.”

“Sir.” Constable Terrell, ex-military police as he was, just managed not to salute his superior officer, but was otherwise crisp efficiency and dispatch. He was out the door in seconds.

Waiting for Terrell, Darling thought about the sequence of events. The thief had come in the back door, found the owner at work, killed him, and then . . . torn the office apart and gone through to the shop, creating a din and helping himself. Then he’d run out the back door. To a car he’d parked right behind in the alley? Or had he killed Harold, gone through to the display cases, and then torn the office apart on his way out? But why did it look as if there’d been no actual struggle? It looked for all the world

as if Harold had been dispatched while he was quietly finishing up some paperwork.

It was at this point that he remembered Ashford Gillingham, their usual medical man, had inconsiderately gone off on holiday with his wife.

Terrell appeared by his side.

“Ah. Good. Come with me,” Darling said, and led the way around the block and into the alley behind the shop. Pulling the keys from his pocket, he opened the rear door and led Terrell to the office where Mr. Harold sat, his head collapsed on the desk, the blood from his final experience of this life congealing around the wound in his skull.

“Do you know this man, sir?” Terrell asked, standing with his hands behind his back, as if to remind himself not to touch anything.

“I do. It’s the owner of the store, Ronald Harold. His wife thinks he’s in Vancouver.”

“It looks like he came in at night, or the early hours,” observed Terrell.

Darling saw at once what he meant. The dead man was wearing a trench coat over his suit, and furthermore, it was still a bit damp, as if he’d been in the thick of the downpour. He’d been so focused on the damage to the victim’s skull that he hadn’t noticed his clothing.

“Yes, well done. I expect you’re right. When did that downpour stop?”

“I couldn’t say, sir. But I did wake up around 4 AM and it had stopped by then.”

“So, he comes in last night, planning to work. Someone kills him before he has time to take off his coat. Unless he

was keeping it on because it was cold, or he only wanted to stay a short time. He was supposed to be going to Vancouver. Does it look to you like there was a struggle?”

Terrell looked around the shambolic office. “At first sight, yes sir, but I see what you’re suggesting. It’s not really like the man and his killer had wrestled. It looks more like he was killed where he sat and then the killer started looking for something.”

Darling grunted agreement. “Lock up and go round the front to keep people away from the temptation of peering in the windows. Gilly’s away. We have to get someone else.”

“Yes, sir.”

BACK AT THE station, Darling called Ames into his office. “How’s that man’s poor wife?”

“Well, she’s upset about the robbery still. Even O’Brien’s famous bedside manner will not do any good when she learns about her husband.”

“Hmm,” Darling agreed. “I’ve just remembered Gilly’s away on vacation. We’ll have to find someone else.”

“All done, sir.” Ames looked at a small piece of notepaper in his hand. “The hospital has someone on hand, as it happens. There’s a Dr. Miyazaki who is visiting from Lillooet, and he actually has experience with this sort of thing. They just called back a moment ago, and he’s on his way here.”

“Oh, well then,” Darling said, a little surprised. It was only a short time ago during the war that Japanese Canadians were *personae non gratae*, as it were. “Good. That’s lucky. By the way, sharp-eyed Terrell noticed his raincoat was damp. That might help us with placing the time.”

Ames had a proprietary interest in Terrell, underling and newish though he was, because he considered him something of a friend. He was also Nelson's first Black police officer. "Good catch on his part, then."

"Yup," Darling said, but noted with approval that Ames seemed genuinely pleased and was feeling no jealousy about Terrell's often trenchant observations.

"You're sure it's him, sir?"

Still trying to collect himself after the gruesome discovery, Darling resisted the urge to be sarcastic this time. "I am. I bought my wife's engagement and wedding rings from him. Of course, we'll need Mrs. Harold to identify him officially, but not until Dr. Miyazaki has had a look."

Darling turned to the pressing matter of telling the poor man's wife. How to say it? He imagined going back for the ledgers and going over the inventory with her, without telling her just yet. No. He shook his head to clear the nonsense. He was being ridiculous. He would have to tell her at once. He just dreaded it, as he always did when he had to tell anyone that a loved one had died, especially in so gruesome a manner.

"When Dr. Miyazaki comes, get O'Brien to let us know. We have to go and talk to Mrs. Harold."

"Yes, sir," Ames said, relieved that delivering such terrible news was not his job this time.

Pulling firmly at the hem of his jacket, Darling led the way downstairs.